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"So, why do you sign?" Deaf and hearing new signers, their motivation, and revitalisation policies for sign languages

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**“So, why do you sign?”
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“So, why do you sign?”
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1. Introduction

The Flipside, a website which playfully addresses life as a deaf person generally, and in the U.S. specifically, in September 2017 publishes a video. We see a deaf person spotting someone signing on the street and approaching the person by asking “are you deaf”? The presenter then intervenes, saying “we must do something” about this “are you deaf?”-question, and “need to come up with a different approach”. Indeed, he says, this person could as well be any hearing person who knows American Sign Language (ASL). The sketch is then replayed with the deaf person approaching the same person, and the conversation goes like this:
- “You know ASL?”
- “Yes I do.”
- “Me too! I am deaf. What about you?”
- “Oh, I am a language enthusiast. I love learning different languages. So far, ASL is my favourite one.”¹

This brief vignette illustrates that sign languages are becoming part of the linguistic repertoires of an increasing number of hearing people. Sign languages are no longer in-group languages mainly used by deaf people and their children. Evolutions in broadcasting, communication technologies, social media, and the greater availability of formal learning opportunities mean that the public visibility of and access to sign languages for hearing people is greater than ever before.

In many American and some Canadian postsecondary contexts, ASL courses have emerged as an increasingly popular foreign-language offering (Snoddon 2016). On a

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/theflipsideshow/videos/341873389597212/>

blog, a deaf traveller from the UK recently described his experience in the U.S. as “ASL signers suddenly appearing out of nowhere”, having had 14 encounters over 10 days when someone could sign in ASL: shop assistants, waiters, immigration officials, metro security staff, et cetera.² In a European context it is estimated that there are “eight to ten hearing sign language users per each signing deaf person” in Sweden (Svartholm 2014). In the UK, for every deaf person who uses British Sign Language (BSL) there are nine hearing people “who have some knowledge of the language” (Woll and Adam 2012: 111). The 2016 Census in Ireland showed that there are 4,944 people using Irish Sign Language; it is estimated that most of them are hearing.³ There is a significant interest in *Baby Sign* courses, which are specifically aimed at hearing parents with hearing babies (Pizer et al. 2007; Snoddon 2014).

At the same hearing people are enjoying greater access to sign languages, there appear to be fewer deaf children who, early on, adopt a sign language in their linguistic repertoires. Over 95% of deaf children has hearing parents (Mitchell and Karchmer 2004). In northern Europe, an estimated 80% of those children are now receiving cochlear implants (Boyes-Braem and Rathmann 2010). Research shows that the uptake of CI is associated with decreased or nonuse of sign language by parents and children (Bruin and Nevøy 2014; Takkinen 2017). Indeed, most of these children are acquiring a primary spoken language, with or without exposure to sign language (Humphries et al. 2017). Research also shows, though, that some hearing parents of deaf children with a CI *do* seek opportunities to learn sign language but are often advised against doing so, find institutional and practical support for it to be weak, and/or perceive a loss of contexts for intergenerational and collective socialisation in sign language (McKee 2017; McKee and Smiler 2017; Snoddon 2016, 2017).

This loss of contexts is a direct result of the erosion of the collective language and cultural transmission spaces of sign language communities (SLCs), communities which have historically emerged in specific geographical locations around the world. Intra- and intergenerational transmission settings like deaf schools are disappearing, and deaf children are now being placed in a wide variety of educational settings, most

² <http://limpingchicken.com/2017/10/24/john-walker-travelling-alone-in-america-made-me-believe-that-a-gcse-in-bsl-is-important/>

³ Personal communication John Bosco Conama, June 28th 2017.

often as the only deaf child in regular schools for hearing non-signing children (Murray et al. 2018). The demise of the deaf schools is paired with threats to the maintenance of other collective physical spaces and social networks for sign language use, like deaf clubs and organized local and regional sporting networks. In the past, these functioned in tandem with the deaf schools and led to a connection between different generations because they were the primary sites where older and younger people met and where newcomers were enculturated by more veteran members (Ladd 2003; Sutton-Spence 2010).

Conversely, because 95% of deaf parents has hearing children, in the youngest age groups it is likely that there are now more hearing than deaf children who adopt a sign language in their linguistic repertoires, most often in the space of the home. There is an increasing inclination among deaf parents to sign with their hearing children and pass on the language.

These are the major factors that have led to a new sociolinguistic order in SLCs with numerical disparities in four domains: (1) a decrease in the number of what I call deaf *traditional signers* (biased towards the older age groups); (2) the group of what I call deaf *new signers* (with a non-traditional background and sign language acquisition path) becoming rule rather than exception; (3) a growing and heterogeneous group of hearing *new signers* with mixed investments in sign languages; and (4) an imbalance in the group of deaf vs. hearing children who have a sign language in their linguistic repertoires. De Meulder & Murray (2017) argued that this expansion of primarily hearing signers can be interpreted as a case of language endangerment but also language revitalization, since the expanding pool of 'new signers' can serve to sustain the existence of sign languages. Bauman & Murray (2017: 252) mention the parallel "dissemination" and "decimation" of ASL use and state that "if we include family members and sign language students, it is likely that a majority of those who know national sign languages are now hearing, not deaf". These changes must be seen against the backdrop of wider changing demographic and sociolinguistic profiles of Western societies as a result of globalization, increased mobility and new technological developments (Vertovec 2007).

89 To discuss and analyse this changing sociolinguistic order, in this article I want to test
90 the appropriateness of the ‘new speaker’ concept that has been used in the context of
91 some of Europe’s lesser-used languages (O’Rourke et al. 2015). Indeed, these
92 numerical disparities are not unique to SLCs and are found in some indigenous
93 language groups like the Sámi (Sarivaraa et al. 2013) and Māori (Spolsky 2003) of
94 which the majority of young speakers are so-called *revitalised* speakers, and in the
95 context of European minority languages like Irish, Galician, Catalan and Basque with
96 many *new speakers*, often outnumbering traditional speakers altogether (O’Rourke et
97 al. 2015).

98 Going forward, I will explore the motivation of deaf and hearing new signers to (learn
99 to) sign or (re)adopt sign language. I will then link these different motivations to
100 revitalisation policies targeted at sign languages. Indeed, of the three conditions for a
101 language to thrive, capacity, opportunity, and motivation (Grin 2003), motivation is
102 now increasingly being understood as the most crucial barrier to successful language
103 maintenance and revitalisation (Cowell 2016). Merely giving people the right to use
104 their language via legal means, or increase their opportunities to use it via e.g.
105 government services in the language does not necessarily affect people's motivation
106 and need to use a language.

107 Motivations are directly tied to language ideologies (Rosa and Burdick 2016). Sign
108 languages and the people who use them are currently the object of **specific** ideologies
109 (Hill 2013; Krausneker 2015), which drive revitalisation policies. The use of sign
110 languages by deaf adults, hearing parents of deaf children and especially deaf children
111 themselves are often the target of ideologies **that discourage or devalue the use of sign**
112 **languages**. For them, sign languages are questioned as languages per se, seen as
113 compensations for hearing loss or incompetency to acquire a spoken language, and
114 seen as a hampering deaf children’s spoken language development (Humphries et al.
115 2017).

116 At the same time **a different set** of ideologies, mostly linked to their use by and
117 exposure to hearing people, give many sign languages prestige: for example, they are
118 seen as beneficial for hearing babies to communicate their needs more efficiently
119 before their spoken language develops, are used in video games, apps, television

series, movies, sports events, children songs, Disney commercials, and are gaining popularity on other cultural, artistic and commercial scenes.

This constitutes an ironic double bind for SLCs: while their languages are increasingly being popularized and institutionalised, at the same time they find themselves becoming increasingly marginalized and medicalized. These language ideologies impact revitalisation policies, and as such each of the above groups' motivation to learn, (re)adopt or keep on signing.

I will argue that revitalisation policies targeted at sign languages are unbalanced. I claim this because they seem to be primarily aimed at one specific group of hearing new signers. Having an intrinsic motivation to sign (many deaf new signers, some hearing new signers like parents of deaf children), seems to be directly opposed to being subject to revitalisation policies. Deaf children, hearing parents, and deaf new signers are often not provided the capacity, opportunity and motivation to learn, use and maintain use of a sign language.

2. Data and positionality

Data in this article come from two main sources: preliminary analysis of interviews with 15 deaf and hearing new and traditional signers between the ages of 18 and 62 in Flanders, Belgium, carried out by the author. The second source is participant observation: I have been engaging with SLCs throughout a 20-year period, mostly in my home SLC (Flanders, Belgium) but also in other (mostly European) SLCs. As a consequence, my arguments are informed by lived experience, and primarily rooted in the European, and more specifically Belgian, context, but I will also often refer to the U.S. or Canadian contexts, especially when discussing the position of hearing new signers. This is all informed by my own position as a deaf researcher (see also Kusters et al. 2017a) and a 'new signer'. I learned to sign when I was 16, through informal language socialisation in deaf spaces. I did thus not grow up with sign language, nor did I go to a deaf school. Still, I sign with my own children now. This lived experience and positionality as a deaf new signer, parent and researcher informed my own thinking in this domain.

My position in this article aligns with that of Spolsky (2014, 2017), taking a human rights or civil rights position towards vitality, seeing it first of all as a matter of social

justice. Indeed, the changing sociolinguistic order described above is not a neutral or natural phenomenon, but the result of a complex interplay of several societal, ideological and political factors. Similarly, language maintenance and revitalisation is fundamentally an anthropological, political and economic problem and not a linguistic one (Cowell 2016). This article thus also aims to contribute to ‘prior ideological clarification’ (Fishman 1991) concerning language revitalisation and answers the call to expand theory-building in this domain (Austin and Sallabank 2014). Ideological clarification entails going beyond vague terms such as ‘saving the language’ but considering questions such as why is language revitalisation desirable, who is it for, and who has the authority to decide such questions (Sallabank 2013).

I will now introduce the ‘new speaker’ framework, and its applicability to ‘new signers’.

3. New speakers and new signers

The new speakers concept first emerged in the context of some of Europe’s lesser-used languages including Catalan (Pujolar and Puigdevall 2015), Galician (O’Rourke and Ramallo 2015) and Irish (O’Rourke and Walsh 2015). One of the rationales for the use of the concept was that language revitalisation studies mainly talk about native and/or heritage communities and not focus on profiles and practices of speakers who emerge outside these communities. Native speakers were often positioned as the legitimate representatives of a given speech community. As a consequence new speakers were (intentionally or otherwise) largely ignored as a linguistic group, despite the fact that they are a necessary part of revitalisation efforts (O’Rourke et al. 2015). The ‘new speaker’ concept has now become an umbrella term to help understand complex speaker profiles which were previously referred to by (now increasingly contested) labels such as ‘non-native’, ‘second language’, ‘L2’ speaker, etc. These concepts not only described but also delegitimised those speakers, and the ‘new speaker’ concept is a clear attempt to move away from those older labels (O’Rourke et al. 2015).

Different definitions of ‘new speakers’ have been used. One is to refer to “individuals with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual educational programs, revitalisation projects

or as adult language learners” (O’Rourke et al. 2015: 1). Pujolar and Puigdevall (2015: 170), in the context of Catalan, use the concept to refer to “people whose language learned in primary socialisation – i.e. with parents or guardians – was not Catalan” and add that in many cases the adjective ‘new’ may be misleading, given that many of the people they refer to as ‘new speakers’ have been Catalan speakers for many years. In the context of Galician, the term has been used to describe a type of speaker “who was not brought up speaking the minority language but who adopted Galician language practices as adolescents or as young adults” (O’Rourke et al. 2015: 4).

None of these existing definitions are tailor-made for the situation of SLCs and new signers. Firstly, this is because for SLCs the concept entails both deaf and hearing new signers. This already adds several layers of complexity because as I will demonstrate, compared to most hearing signers, many deaf signers have a different acquisition and learning path, and a different degree of access to both signed and spoken languages. Secondly, and in line with a social justice view on language revitalisation, I want to take into account the specific situation of deaf children and their (mostly hearing) parents. Because of the negative ideologies described above, they are currently very much at a disadvantage in terms of access to sign languages. McKee (2011: 288) for example observed that in New Zealand, “it is easier for an undergraduate student [...] to learn NZSL for interest as part of their bachelor’s degree than for the parents of a deaf pre-schooler to access regular tuition in NZSL [...]”. This inclusion of children is a divergence from most new speakers research, which primarily addresses adults (but see Costa 2014).

Moreover, “people categories [like ‘new speaker’ or ‘new signer’] are the ones that ‘travel’ most easily outside academic discourses and into public debates and governmental procedures that may be consequential for specific social groups” (Heller et al. 2018: 108). This means I will try to avoid precise definitions of who exactly qualifies as ‘new signer’ or ‘traditional signer’, but will use ‘new signers’ as a permeable broad label or lens that can be used to focus on many different profiles that exist in parallel. Apart from this, it is important to understand that the division between traditional and new speakers/signers is not only characterised by their different language learning trajectories but also by their social profiles and, in the case

of signers, by their sensory asymmetries – it is thus about much more than just ‘linguistic’ differences.

The use of the new speaker concept aligns with a broader biographical approach within research on multilingualism (cf. Busch 2015): it does not take individual languages or varieties as its starting point, but the experiencing multilingual subject with his or her multi-layered linguistic repertoire (Kramsch 2009). This is all framed within a context where the very notion of ‘nativeness’ and ‘native speaker’ is increasingly being contested (Bonfiglio 2013; Liddicoat 2016), the definition and demarcation of languages is itself debated, and language is increasingly seen as a practice as opposed to its linguistic form (Makoni and Pennycook 2005). O’Rourke and Ramallo (2013: 289) state “this prompts us to turn our attention to the in-between spaces that such practices generate”, spaces that have often been ignored in previous (socio)linguistic discussion. This is also true for most sign language research, where attention has often been directed to languages instead of practices (Kusters et al. 2017b), and where the notion of ‘nativeness’ and its underlying ideological connotations has only recently become under scrutiny (Costello et al. 2008; Jaeger 2017; Napier and Leeson 2016). Johnston’s (2006) vitality predictions for Australian Sign Language for example were mainly based on evaluations about the existence (or not) of a ‘core’ deaf community consisting of “deaf native signers”, stating there is “no known way that the continued aging and shrinking of a linguistic community without replacement by younger native users can support a viable language beyond the life spans of the current majority cohort, despite all the goodwill in the world” (Johnston 2006: 165).

4. An unbalanced revitalisation

Language revitalisation can be viewed as a form of language policy that seeks to halt and reverse language shift (Lewis and Royles 2017). This will occur, it is stated, when policy interventions successfully address a range of factors that influence a language’s level of ‘vitality’, where vitality is demonstrated by the extent that the language is used as a means of communication in various social contexts for specific purposes.

The most prominent of these factors are demographic, sociolinguistic, political-institutional, economic, psychological and linguistic factors (Edwards 1992).

Concerning the vitality of sign languages, recent research has pointed to the status of most Western sign languages currently being endangered. This is especially the case in countries with smaller populations, universal new-born hearing screening and state-funded cochlear implants (McKee and Smiler 2017). Most imminently endangered are isolated village sign languages and small territorial sign languages. But even larger national sign languages have been rated as ‘unsafe/vulnerable’ in the UNESCO Language Vitality and Endangerment Questionnaire, which was adapted for sign languages (Safar and Webster 2014; UNESCO 2003). On the adapted EGIDS (Bickford et al. 2015), New Zealand Sign Language, as of yet the only sign language in the world with status as an official national language, has been categorised at level 6b: “used for face-to-face communication within all generations but losing users” (McKee 2017).

The statement that sign languages are ‘endangered’ and thus need to be ‘revitalised’ is in itself an ideological position which needs to be acknowledged and clarified, both with regard to what exactly is ‘endangered’ and as a consequence, what needs to be ‘revitalised’ and ‘maintained’. I argue that by talking about the ‘endangerment’ of sign languages it is first of all their use by deaf people, in ‘deaf spaces’, that is endangered – I will posit that their use by hearing people in non-deaf spaces is not endangered, but even promoted. This means that ‘prior ideological clarification’ in this case means that what needs to be revitalised and maintained is the use of sign languages by deaf people, and that revitalisation only targeted at hearing people is unbalanced.

5. Profiles of deaf traditional signers, deaf new signers, hearing new signers, and deaf and hearing children

I will now provide a first sketch of the profiles of deaf traditional signers, deaf new signers, hearing new signers, and deaf and hearing children, and compare this with some of what is known about ‘new speakers’. For the ‘new signers’ profiles, it is

difficult to say how much and how many factors are constituent of a specific profile: in a sense, 'new signers' is a permeable broad label or lens that can be used to focus on many different profiles that exist in parallel.

5.1. Deaf traditional signers

- Deaf traditional signers are biased towards the older age groups. They have acquired sign language via peer transmission in a residential deaf school context or a day school context, being exposed to sign language when commuting to and from a deaf school. A minority have acquired sign language in the home context. They are often seen (by deaf and hearing new signers) as using 'true' or 'pure' sign language, i.e. using linguistic items consistent with some ideological standard of 'authentic' sign language use (Hill 2013): for example more use of classifiers, visual imagery, non-manual signals, lesser extent of spoken language word order and mouthing, less initialized signs, and less contact features from spoken languages or other sign languages (in a European context, mainly American Sign Language or International Sign).
- Historicity is important for understanding traditional signers' experiences. Many did not consciously 'decide' to sign, because the deaf school context in many cases automatically 'gave' them sign language (by contact with deaf peers). This does not mean that it came natural to them or that they were given free access to sign languages: many have physically or mentally been punished for signing (Ladd 2003) and many of them have never received an education in or about sign language. While they could sign in some specific spaces in the deaf schools (e.g. the dorms and playgrounds) during the years of strict oralist policies (from approximately 1880 to 1980) when most traditional signers went to school, signing was forbidden in most European deaf schools.
- Traditional signers' perception of hearing signing people might be influenced by the time in which they grew up; a time when sign languages were still in-group languages and few hearing people could sign. For example, many of them are still astonished to meet hearing people who can sign, especially hearing children; some traditional signers might cope with feelings of guilt or

regret because not having signed with their (hearing or even deaf) children when they were small - because they were being advised against it, internalised negative ideologies about it (for example in a deaf school context being exposed to the ideology that sign language is not a 'real' language), or just didn't know it was überhaupt possible.

5.2. Deaf new signers

Deaf new signers are not 'new' to SLCs. The historical pattern whereby deaf people who did not grow up using sign language will adopt sign language (or re-adopt in case they had some exposure as a child) as a teenager, adolescent or adult when finding a deaf peer group has always been a part of SLCs (Carty 2006; Johnston 2006; Ladd 2003; Napier and Leeson 2016). At the same time, this also highlights the problematic assumption (mostly by hearing parents of deaf children) that an adult sign language collective "will autonomously sustain itself as a cultural resource to be discovered later in life" (McKee 2017: 344).

The importance of deaf new signers for vitality should not be underestimated (Carty 2006). McKee (2017) interviewed young NZSL "L2 users" (15-29 years old), and argues that they compromise a critical cohort for predicting future sign language vitality. Indeed, many of them acquire sign language later in life when they seek out a deaf peer group by going to a deaf club or deaf events "and may explore language identity choices different from those initially presented to them by their parents" (p. 337).

The group of deaf new signers is very varied. It includes, among others, deaf people who learn sign language in their (young) adolescence through peer contact, for example by going to a deaf club or deaf events, or deaf people who have been exposed to sign language in their childhood (e.g. by starting school in a deaf school) but have 'lost' the language during secondary school (mainstreaming) and re-adopt it in their teenage years/young adolescence. For many of them however, the adjective 'new' is a misnomer because they have been signing for many years. Their language trajectory and socioeconomic background however is often distinct from that of traditional signers – they are often multilingual and mobile, and higher educated. The group also includes deaf people who learn sign language through formal lessons, deaf people

who self-report first having used various forms of ‘Sign Supported English’ and later shift to ‘sign language’ (which is itself an profoundly ideological stance) (e.g. Weber forthcoming), and deafened people who learn how to sign.

Despite the high diversity within this group, there are a few factors that many deaf new signers seem to have in common (and also have in common with new speakers of spoken minority languages):

- The majority begin to acquire sign language outside the home or deaf school context – many acquire passive or active competency through informal language socialisation which can (partly) take place in ‘traditional’ spaces such as deaf clubs.
- Some have acquired a spoken language first, so the ‘new’ is not only linked to the adoption of a new language but also a new modality (spoken and then signed).
- Many deaf new signers share stories of *rites de passage* in becoming a new signer, for example becoming acquainted with a specific deaf adult who acted as a deaf ‘guardian’ or ‘role model’ to them when they first joined deaf spaces (Sutton-Spence 2010).
- Many can point to one or more stages across their life trajectory at which a (sudden or gradual) transformation of their linguistic practices occurred, which brought about a reorganisation of their linguistic repertoires and as such also a new form of self-representation. This has many interesting links with the linguistic *mudes* concept in new speakers research (Pujolar & Puigdevall 2015; Puigdevall et al. 2018). For deaf new signers, these biographical junctures can be for example entering specific (sometimes traditional) deaf spaces and being exposed to sign language and deaf ways of being, going to university and having a sign language interpreter or meeting other deaf students, meeting a deaf or signing partner, or starting to work at a deaf workplace. Just as with linguistic *mudes* for new speakers, for new signers this “is not only a change of language [...] but a change in the way one organises language choice in everyday life”, which can be “triggered by language ideologies and fuelled by different motivations” (Puigdevall et al. 2018: 2). For deaf signers, these

motivations can be the desire to belong (to a deaf peer group), find their ‘deaf identity’, or to live without (or with less) communication problems. Language ideologies can be for example the wish to shift from SSE to sign language (e.g. Weber forthcoming).

- For many deaf new signers, transition into *new signerness* is a very affective process fraught with emotions (cf. Walsh 2017 for emotions and new speakerness and Kramsch 2009 for the affective aspect of learning new languages) and can be very confusing. Many have been exposed to negative ideologies about sign languages and signing deaf people in their childhood, some have traumatic childhood experiences including language deprivation, isolation from peers in mainstream schools (some being deliberately kept from meeting other deaf children) and undergoing CI surgery they did not consent to. When they finally arrive in deaf spaces, many feel an overwhelming sense of sameness and happiness, sometimes described as moving from darkness to light (Padden and Humphries 1988) and using imagery such as ‘home’ and ‘family’ (Lane et al. 1996). This is often experienced as transformational, and paired with learning about deaf ways of being (Ladd 1979, 2003; Swinbourne 2015; Weber forthcoming).
- While generally not being physically punished for using sign language, for many deaf new signers their transition into new signerness does not come easy: many experience rejection, both by hearing people (for example their friends or family members, who do not understand the changes in their linguistic practices) as well as by some deaf people, who might (initially) describe them as ‘oral’, ‘hard of hearing’, ‘not deaf enough’ or ‘cultural interlopers’ because of their linguistic and cultural background and language use (Napier and Leeson 2016; Weber forthcoming).
- Because of their distinct background (higher educated, mobile), some deaf new signers are perceived (by traditional signers and also sometimes other deaf new signers) as representing ‘new’ sign language (i.e. not authentic) with more contact features from spoken languages (e.g. different/more mouthing patterns) and other sign languages, mainly International Sign and American Sign

Language, and less modality-specific aspects that traditional signers use.

5.3. Hearing new signers

The group of hearing new signers is equally diverse and does not constitute one specific profile. It consists of two main groups. The first groups are so-called NERDs (Not Even Related to Deaf)⁴. Those people often do not have actual contact with deaf people and/or do not use sign language outside of the classroom context. Up till now, NERDs are mostly found in U.S. and Canadian contexts, where they learn to sign in high schools, colleges, or online through apps (see for example <http://theaslapp.com/>). As will be seen in section 6.1, their position in terms of motivation is often perceived as controversial by deaf people.

The group of hearing new signers also includes people who *are* related in some way to deaf people, e.g. partners, friends, family, colleagues, and parents of deaf children and whose motivation to sign is often different than that of NERDs. Just like many deaf new signers, they can point to a life event which reorganised their linguistic repertoires and at which *mudes* took place (Puigdevall et al. 2018). For many of them, this happened when become a parent, friend, or couple.

5.4. Deaf and hearing children and hearing parents

In the U.S., with increased public acceptance of ASL and the popularity of *Baby Signs*, the most significant group now generally *not* offered the opportunity to learn to sign from birth are deaf children who receive CIs (Neidle and Nash 2015). Deaf cartoonist Maureen Klusza in her well-known cartoon (see Figure 1) called this the “greatest irony”: that despite the large amount of research showing the benefits of sign language for hearing babies, deaf babies are not allowed to sign.

⁴ It seems the NERD concept appeared in the U.S. around the same time other acronyms like CODA (Children of Deaf Adults) and SODA (Sibling of Deaf Adult) were beginning to be used (mid to late 1980s). While SODA was used in a more serious way, NERD was used more humorously, as a form of self-identification primarily used by sign language interpreters. I have chosen to use the concept here because it is a suitable acronym in this context.

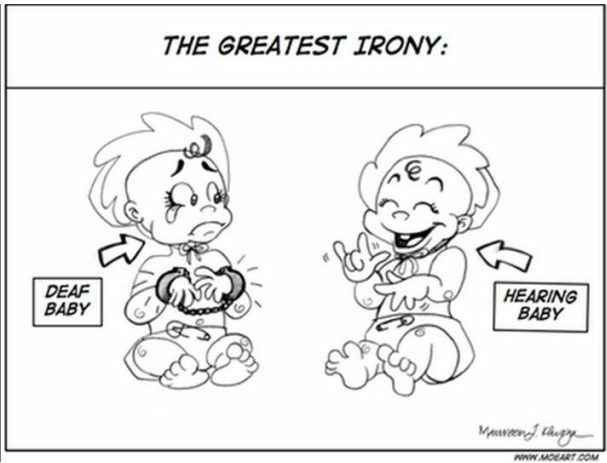


Figure 1: The greatest irony (cartoon by Maureen Klusza)

McKee & Smiler (2017: 51) observe that New Zealand is witnessing “a decline of incentive, opportunity, and context for young deaf children to acquire NZSL”.

Hearing parents who want to become and remain new signers must overcome significant obstacles caused by powerful ideological triggers, e.g. the ideology that signing will hamper their child’s spoken language development (Humphries et al. 2017).

On the other hand, there seem to be an increasing number of hearing children who sign. Most of them have deaf parents, of whom some are new signers themselves (not having acquired sign language from *their* parents), and some of them are hearing new signers, e.g. in the case of mixed deaf-hearing couples.

6. So, why do you sign? Deaf and hearing new signers and motivation

6.1. NERDs

The increasing number of NERDs learning to sign is generally applauded by deaf people because they are seen as helpful to expand domains of use beyond existing speaker base, and as such assist with heightening public visibility. In advocacy contexts, their estimated number is often added to that of deaf signers, to help increase (or inflate) numbers for political reasons, e.g. the advancement of sign language rights. NERDs’ contribution to vitality is thus often discussed in instrumental terms and appreciated for instrumental reasons.

Regarding motivation however, they take up a more controversial position. Deaf people have expressed concerns that many of those NERDs are not capable of carrying on a conversation with a deaf person, never get to meet deaf people and that the increasing number of NERDs is not leading to any tangible benefits for deaf people. Their motivation is sometimes perceived (rightly or not) as chiefly instrumental (an easy way to get course credits), or out of a strangely exotic interest in sign language. For ASL in postsecondary education, Snoddon (2016) notes it is difficult to assess what return is made (if any) to SLCs themselves beyond employment of deaf ASL instructors. In New Zealand, McKee (2017) found that 80% of deaf people she surveyed knew fewer than 10 hearing people capable of a 'decent conversation' in NZSL, and many of these were interpreters. There is often the concern that NERDs are only interested to learn the signs for specific words, without interest in the cultural context (Ellcessor 2015). This brings up questions regarding 'token maintenance', which has also been discussed in revitalisation literature more generally (Thieberger 2002).

Also, in a Canadian context, Snoddon (2016) argues that while the teaching of indigenous languages is tied and directed to their communities of origin, the perceived value of the teaching of ASL "rests on its learning by dominant-culture speakers rather than being tied to the language revitalisation efforts of cultural minorities" (p. 1-2), primarily sign language rights for deaf children. Consequently, she calls for more consideration of how these ASL classes can effectively support revitalisation: e.g. by including employment of deaf ASL signers as instructors, student field placement in schools, agencies, churches and related sites where interaction with and service to local deaf communities may take place (p. 10).

Another controversial aspect of some NERDs' motivations is that some take economic advantage from learning sign language without engaging with deaf people or, if they do, mostly foregrounding their own position. There are a multitude of music videos available on the Internet with NERDs trying to get their place in the spotlights. Baby Signs courses are a booming business and often taught by hearing people, some of whom not fluent in sign language (Snoddon 2014). Hollywood movies cast hearing actors who learn some signs for deaf roles (diMarco 2017). These practices have

sparked debates about representation, cultural appropriation, loss of ownership and authenticity and linguistic prescriptivism and purism (see e.g. Snoddon 2016).

Summarized, for many NERDs, using sign language comes with certain economic, but also personal and ideological rewards: by using sign language they are seen as contributing to “inclusion”, “feel-good diversity”, and taking an advocacy stance (“showing up for the deaf community”).

6.2. Deaf new signers and hearing signers related to deaf people

Many deaf new signers, following their distinct childhood experiences, often make an active decision to acquire competence in sign language as an act of identity or for ideological or political reasons (cf. Walsh and Murchadha 2014 for new speakers). Many want to learn sign language to be able to socialize with other deaf people and learn about deaf ways of being. John Walker, in the movie ‘Found’, talks about how he met his (hearing, non-signing) parents after his first actual stay with deaf peers at a summer camp. They came to pick him up, and when they arrived he signed to them where the car park was, to which his mother said “don’t sign!”. John: “I walked over to where they’d parked and knocked on the window. [...] I said “Mum, the people I’ve met here are really lovely. Maybe we don’t need to sign, and that’s fine. But they sign and I want to sign with them. So I will sign – OK?” (Swinbourne 2015).

The motivation of the group of hearing new signers who are related to deaf people is often taken for granted, although it has not garnered significant research attention yet - apart from accounts of hearing parents’ barriers to learn to sign (e.g. West 2013 and the online community <http://www.whysisign.com/>, which is exactly about motivation). Often, those people have an intrinsic motivation to sign – to communicate with their deaf family member, friend, colleague and are actively looking at opportunities and contexts to learn and use sign language.

Negative ideologies towards the use of sign language by deaf signers, and some hearing signers like parents however, lead to a lack of revitalisation policies for this group. Many deaf children and hearing parents are discouraged from signing, and many deaf new signers need to find their way to sign language on their own.

7. Conclusion

In this article I have introduced a new sociolinguistic order in SLCs, exploring the profiles of deaf traditional signers, deaf new signers, hearing new signers and deaf and hearing children, and discussed the motivation of deaf and hearing new signers. Contributing to ‘ideological clarification’, I have argued that the ‘endangerment’ of sign languages primarily concerns threats to their use by deaf people, while hearing people, especially NERDs, seem to have greater access to sign languages than ever before. The different motivations of those groups link to different language ideologies and revitalisation policies to which those groups are subject to. Having an intrinsic motivation to sign seems to be directly opposed to being subject to revitalisation policies, while having a more instrumental motivation is often being rewarded in various ways.

By using a ‘new signer lens to look at language trajectories and backgrounds of deaf and hearing signers, I have argued for looking at choice, ideological stance, and motivation as factors in predicting vitality – not whether someone is ‘native’ or not (cf. Cowell 2016). It is critical that more research attention is directed towards the motivation of each of these groups. This brings up several questions for future research directions. How can we work to re-balance revitalisation policies targeted at sign languages, by ensuring that *all* of these groups have the desire and motivation to adopt a sign language in their linguistic repertoires? If deaf children with CIs have the choice not to sign (because having access to other, more dominant languages), and their parents are being discouraged from it, how can we work to give them capacity, ample opportunities, and motivation to sign? How can legislation and policies support both deaf new signers’ multilingualism and their motivation to sign? For NERDs, how can we work to ensure their language practices go beyond token maintenance and are of interest to SLCs’ revitalisation agendas? How can we guarantee that the positive ideologies directed towards NERDs are extended to deaf signers’ language practices?

A better understanding of the profiles, language practices and motivations of each of these groups will be instrumental for developing evidence-based sign language policies for the future.

Acknowledgments

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Response to reviewer

Thank you for the additional comments on the manuscript. Below, I have responded to each comment – the reviewer’s comment is in black font; my response is in blue font, changes I quote from the revised manuscript are in orange. Page and line numbers refer to the revised manuscript. In the manuscript, I have highlighted in yellow where changes have been made or text has been added, and in green where text has been moved.

Comment 1:

“De Meulder & Murray (2017) argued that this expansion of primarily hearing signers can be interpreted as a case of language endangerment but also language revitalization. Bauman & Murray (2017: 252) mention the parallel “dissemination” and “decimation” of ASL use and state that “if we include family members and sign language students, it is likely that a majority of those who know national sign languages are now hearing, not deaf”.
=> I think this needs more explanation in the paragraph itself. Or you could move it down a few paragraphs so that it’s more clear what is meant.

I have moved this paragraph to p. 3 lines 79–85. After the reference to De Meulder & Murray (2017) I have also added a brief explanation. This now reads: De Meulder and Murray (2017) argued that this expansion of primarily hearing signers can be interpreted as a case of language endangerment but also language revitalization, since the expanding pool of ‘new signers’ can serve to sustain the existence of sign languages.

Comment 2:

Page 22: Re the two paragraphs about negative vs positive ideologies. Which ideologies are positive vs negative are a valuation by researchers in themselves (and this valuation is ideological in itself). Also ideologies that are very different are grouped together here, as “negative”, in a simplistic way. Alternatively, you could say what the ideologies are and what the result is (eg “ideologies that discourage or devalue the use of sign languages”), rather than categorizing them as neg or pos.

I think the reviewer means p. 4 lines 106–119 in the first revision? Thank you for this comment, this was indeed an ideological evaluation. In line 108 I have deleted ‘negative’ and changed to ‘specific’ ideologies, and explained them as ideologies that discourage or devalue the use of sign languages. In line 116 I have left out ‘positive’ and changed to ‘a different set of ideologies’. These paragraphs now read:

Motivations are directly tied to language ideologies (Rosa and Burdick 2016). Sign languages and the people who use them are currently the object of specific ideologies (Hill 2013; Krausneker 2015), which drive revitalisation policies. The use of sign languages by deaf adults, hearing parents of deaf children and especially deaf children themselves are often the target of ideologies that discourage or devalue the use of sign languages. For them, sign languages are questioned as languages per se, seen as compensations for hearing loss or incompetency to acquire a spoken language, and seen as a hampering deaf children’s spoken language development (Humphries et al. 2017).

At the same time a different set of ideologies, mostly linked to their use by and exposure to hearing people, give many sign languages prestige: for example, they are seen as beneficial for hearing babies to communicate their needs more efficiently before their spoken language develops, are used in video games, apps, television series, movies, sports events, children

songs, Disney commercials, and are gaining popularity on other cultural, artistic and commercial scenes.

Comment 3:

“have been a participant observer throughout a 20-year period,” => rephrase? participant observation is a term specific to ethnographic research methodologies. It implies focusing on a particular set of themes and making field notes. Rather, you could say that your research is informed by “lived experience” rather than that you were “participant observer”.

I have deleted “have been a participant observer” and added “lived experience” (line 140). This now reads: “I have been engaging with SLCs throughout a 20-year period, mostly in my home SLC (Flanders, Belgium) but also in other (mostly European) SLCs. As a consequence, my arguments are informed by lived experience, and primarily rooted in the European, and more specifically Belgian, context [...].”

Comment 4:

“as a teenager or young adolescent when finding a deaf peer group has always been a part of SLCs “ => always? Can you be more specific as to what kind of evidence there is? Also, can you broaden this to adults in general? Eg Pierre Desloges’ work on the pre-school Parisian deaf community: Desloges himself learned as an adult rather than an adolescent. Being 18+ means more freedom to move towards deaf spaces.

I have added a few references to support this statement: Johnston 2006; Ladd 2003; Napier and Leeson 2016, and I have broadened the statement to adults (lines 318–320): The historical pattern whereby deaf people who did not grow up using sign language will adopt sign language (or re-adopt in case they had some exposure as a child) as a teenager, adolescent or adult when finding a deaf peer group has always been a part of SLCs (Carty 2006; Johnston 2006; Ladd 2003; Napier and Leeson 2016).

Comment 5:

“many of them acquire sign language later in adolescence” change into “later in life”? adolescence only refers to the age group 15-18 I think? (while eg “youth” is broader and in deaf contexts seems to refer to age 16-30/35)

Has been changed to “later in life” (line 327).

Comment 6:

“are often skilled visual communicators,” => Refer to literature on deaf people’s being “visual”, even deaf people who have been mainstreamed? Lipreading, written language, cued speech etc. are visual...

I agree this is claim is unclear. I think the observation still stands, but I can’t really support the claim. I have left it out. So this is now only (lines 351–353): Some have acquired a spoken language first, so the ‘new’ is not only linked to the adoption of a new language but also a new modality (spoken and then signed).

Comment 7:

“with a specific deaf adult who acted as a ‘deaf parent’ “ => is “role model” a better word here? Often, these people seem to be peers who are slightly older, rather than a full generation older.

For me it is not just a role model, but someone who watches over them, guards them. You are right the generational difference does not always apply. I have left out ‘parent’ and changed to “deaf ‘guardian’ or ‘role model’” (line 359): “... for example becoming acquainted with a specific deaf adult who acted as a deaf ‘guardian’ or ‘role model’ to them when they first joined deaf spaces (Sutton-Spence 2010).”

Comment 8:

“many deaf new signers their transition into new signerness does not come easy: many experience rejection,” => rejection of their language use? Their new identity? Rejected as a person?

I have tried to make this clearer by adding some clarification (lines 392–396). This now reads: While generally not being physically punished for using sign language, for many deaf new signers their transition into new signerness does not come easy: many experience rejection, both by hearing people (for example their friends or family members, who do not understand the changes in their linguistic practices) as well as by some deaf people, who might (initially) describe them as ‘oral’, ‘hard of hearing’, ‘not deaf enough’ or ‘cultural interlopers’ because of their linguistic and cultural background and language use (Napier and Leeson 2016; Weber forthcoming).

Comment 9:

“This group also includes people who are related “=> “this” is confusing here, I first thought you meant the NERDs (and I thought it was NERDAs rather than NERDs?

“This” refers to the group of hearing new signers. I have changed accordingly (line 414): “The group of hearing signers also includes people who *are* related in some way...”

The original concept as found in U.S. discourses and publications is NERD(s), not NERDA(s). Friedner (2018) for some reason added the “A” but does not explain why.